

A Special Christmas by kirabook

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Summary:

Christmas is a time for family

Winter 1985

A Special Christmas

Author's Note:

This fic is part of a series and takes place Winter, 1985. Stay tuned for more

“All right Max, and what do you think you got?” Lucas turned to the red-haired girl bundled up in one of Mike’s blankets. It was Christmas, 1985. Or the day before Christmas Eve. The crazy hijinks from the summer, last year and the year before was far away.

“The usual. A sweater. And warm socks. I asked for them this time.”

“Still not used to the cold?” Dustin asked, stretched out on the couch and skimming through his brand new D&D manual. Official Advanced Dungeons and Dragons, Unearthed Arcana. It came out in August and reasons he couldn’t get it until now and the fun in incorporating it into their campaigns. Most of his ranting flew over her head.

“I’m freezing like an icicle.”

“Could be worse.” Max glanced over to El resting on her elbows next to Will, watching him draw. Will was in his own world as he sketched a scene from their recent D&D campaign. Mike wanted to expand their binder filled with important game changing events and charged Will with doing so as usual. It distracted him from the group conversation, but Will spent most of today with his head in the clouds. Max wasn’t privy as to why.

“Could be snowing or raining. Or an icy mixture of both. It’ll snow tomorrow and on Christmas,” Dustin added. “Three or four inches later in the day.”

“A proper Christmas.” Lucas handed another blanket to Max. By the time she left, she’d be under a mountain of them. She’d fall asleep in the dimly lit basement. Max assumed they’d be excited to discuss Christmas and their potential gifts, but they wasted their energy playing Mike’s Nintendo earlier. So far, only he had one. When the

party met up, it was a struggle between playing D&D or a game. She preferred the games.

“Proper?” El inquired, glancing up from Will’s drawing.

“Yeah,” Mike answered. He was on her other side propped on his elbows, leaning his chin on his palms. “When it snows on Christmas, looks more like... Christmas.”

“A white Christmas,” Will continued. “Looks like Christmas because Santa lives at the North Pole where there’s always snow. And ice...” He finished, mumbling incoherently as he focused on darkening his line art with a pen. At least El understood him because she nodded in understanding.

“Hopper didn’t tell you that either?” Mike frowned. El sighed and nudged his shoulder with her own. When El didn’t understand something he figured she should by now, he blamed Hopper. Sometimes himself. It happened less now since she spent so much time at Will’s house or the party.

The door to the basement creaked letting light pour into the basement. Nancy descended a few steps, dressed in a cream sweater, a dark green skirt and a smile. Her whole demeanor screamed Christmas mood.

“Will, El. Hopper is here so it's time to go.”

“What?” Mike sat up, face still set in a frown. “It’s only 9 o’clock!”

Nancy threw up her hands. She didn’t have authority over Hopper and when picked them up. The situation with Will was different though. Hopper drove out of his way to take Will home, his hidden cabin was in the opposite direction. Did he want to spare Will a lonely bike ride or walk home in the cold? Or paranoia got to him like Joyce and Jonathan. Even on warmer days, Hopper served as Joyce and Jonathan’s avatar and provided Will transportation even when he didn’t want it.

It was funny watching the large man act like a father. The kind man - albeit gruff and grumpy - was nothing like her father. He was nothing

like Jonathan's father either. She wondered what Jonathan thought of Hopper and his slow but steady presence in his family's life. Whenever Nancy asked, Jonathan changed the subject...

"Will?" Nancy completed her descent just as El and Will finished collecting their things. When they were together, Will and El left through the basement instead of the house or garage. Hopper cleaned the basement of wires and bugs, but not the rest of the house. The government might notice their absence and one can never be too careful.

"Give this to Jonathan for me?" Nancy handed Will a small wrapped gift. He nodded and put it in his bag. "This one is for all of you." She passed him a gift bag much to his surprise.

"Really?" Will peered into the bag, but vibrant tissue paper hid the contents.

"Yes, and no snooping." Nancy led the two to the door as Mike held it open. Cool air flowed into the basement, causing Max to pull the pile of blankets closer. El exchanged a hug with Mike before she followed Will to Hopper's warm truck waiting on the curb.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas!" They called back. Mike didn't shut the door until they drove away.

"... Did you give El the gift?" Nancy looked at her younger brother, drawing the interest of the others in the room.

"Yeah, I guess."

"You guess?" Max's brow shot up in skepticism. "That's a yes or no question."

"I... put it in Will's bag. Will will notice." Everybody stared, astonished by the ridiculous plan. "He'll give it to her!" Mike repeated, cheeks bright from embarrassment. So what if he chickened out giving El her first Christmas present in person, at least the gift had his name on it?

“Dang man. Thought you had more confidence than that...” There were many times Lucas pitied his best friend, but this one took the top spot.

“I want to peek so bad.” Will complained from the backseat, holding Nancy’s gift in his lap. The present was for the whole family so he figured the bag had sweets, candies, candles or something. Didn’t stop the curiosity from eating at his patience.

“Need me to hold it until you get home? Might help the temptation.” Hopper studied Will from the rearview mirror with a mocking stern face. Will shook his head and held the gift bag to his chest. A mischievous smile spread on his face. Once upon a time, his behavior might have annoyed Hopper. Now, watching him fool around was a welcomed annoying behavior. He imagined Will acting like this before everything happened, but he’d never meet the Will from before the tragedy.

“No one would notice if you peeked.” El offered. El twisted in the passenger seat, facing Will in the back.

“I would.” Hopper elbowed El, making her turn back. She didn’t want to take her eyes off of Will in the backseat, but Hopper kept the observation to himself. “Stop encouraging bad behavior.”

“Well, we’re allowed to open one present on Christmas Eve...” Will suggested.

“Really?” El twisted again, eager to learn more about celebrating Christmas. She spent last Christmas alone with Hopper in the cabin. He woke her early in the morning with presents everywhere. She wondered where he got them, but Hopper maintained they weren’t his.

‘*Santa brought the presents,*’ He explained.

The man was an awful liar and yet she couldn’t solve how he hid so many gifts in their cramped cabin without her finding them. He got her new clothes, clothes she told him she liked. Hopper even got her makeup. The makeup palette had a range of colors, but she stuck to a

familiar purple and black. She got a large box of colored pencils, but it wasn't from him. It was from Joyce, Will and Jonathan. In the lab, she got to color with a few crayons once, but she couldn't keep them. Hopper bought her puzzles and plenty of other activities, but he always skipped crayons and colored pencils. Most importantly, Joyce and Will got her her own radio to match theirs. It wasn't strong enough to reach the rest of the party unless she focused her power to strengthen the signal.

Later that night, Hopper made a special dinner. He never made a grand meal, but that night it was a feast. Before bed, they watched a few Christmas movies. The movies explained a lot, but she still had questions. Questions Hopper didn't know how to answer or was unwilling to explain. El thought it had to do with his daughter so chose not to ask anymore. She asked no one until now.

"Yep. One present before bed, to make you excited for the rest of the presents. Or a present the day before that which is today." El turned to Hopper, delighted by the suggestion.

"I suppose you can do that, but it's not even Christmas Eve." Opening a present two days before Christmas sounded like bologna.

Will scooted forward, leaning into the front of the truck. "You should DEFINITELY open cards early."

"Cards?" El questioned. Opening a card wasn't on the top of her 'want to open' list.

"Yeah... there might be big surprises in them... Or something."

"In a card?" Hopper echoed. Will avoided their eyes, choosing instead to focus on the road ahead.

"Yeah..."

The door swung open when they pulled up to the house. Joyce waited at the door with a broad smile. She didn't look worried or concerned which put Hopper at ease. Hopper planned to drop Will off, but Joyce waved for them to come.

Before Hopper stopped her, El exited the truck with Will and rushed to wrap her arms around Joyce. By the time he got out of the truck, the kids were already inside the warm, humble abode. Joyce waited by the door for him, hugging her arms because of the chill.

“What, am I diseased or something? What took so long?” Joyce joked when Hopper joined her.

“No, not that I can tell.”

“... Weather slowing your joints?”

“Alright alright, that’s enough.” Hopper entered the house. Joyce snorted in amusement as the door closed behind him.

Warmth emanated from the small but welcoming home. Multicolored lights hung on the walls and above the doors. The Christmas tree in the corner brightened the living room and had a few presents underneath. A hanukkiah sat on their dining room table next to a small bowl of sweets. Joyce drew his attention, patting his arm.

“Do you like it?”

“Eh... I’ll be honest. My decorating is better.” He actually tried to decorate the cabin this year with Jane. Joyce rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling. Joyce approached a bookshelf and took a red envelope kept between a few books. She nudged it against Hopper’s chest.

“Just for me? Why thank you.”

“For both of you. It’s... something special.”

“Something special?”

Joyce responded, “That’s right. Maybe... you’ll open it early?”

“... A card?” Hopper frowned. First Will and now Joyce? He wasn’t stupid, they were hinting at something. “What’s in it, Super Bowl tickets?”

“Me buying Super Bowl tickets?” Joyce crossed her arms and lifted an

eyebrow.

"You never know."

"Hopper." Jonathan walked up to the couple with two tupperware containers. "Made extra today."

"Ah, thanks." Hopper tucked the card away in his coat and took the bowls. It smelled delicious, meaning Jonathan cooked tonight. "I'll save it for Christmas dinner."

"Ah, well..." Jonathan shuffled his feet. He looked like he needed to say something. Joyce, Jonathan and Hopper stood there, waiting for him to finish the thought, but it never came. Jonathan nodded and shuffled away back to the kitchen.

"... Alright, what's going on?" First Will, then Joyce and now Jonathan. Jonathan's hesitance wasn't completely out of character, but still.

"Huh??" Joyce's gaze dropped to the floor. "What are you talking about?" Hopper grabbed her hand, stopping her nail biting she didn't realize she started. When Joyce glanced up, Hopper's face was a perfect mixture of annoyance and curiosity.

"... Let's talk." Joyce pushed past Hopper and grabbed her coat.

They stood outside, sharing a cigarette as always. He watched her inhale the warm smoke and sigh. Her mood confused him. Her anxiety and fear was easy to read, but relaxed? Happy? That was a rarer sight, he couldn't decipher which one she was going through right now. Joyce noticed his stare and met his eyes, but she didn't speak.

"So... what's going on? Everything ok?" Hopper reached for the cigarette and she handed it back to him.

"Everything's great for once... For a while."

"Everything's great." Hopper repeated, pretending to miss the latter half of her remark. "That's nice."

“And you?”

“Nothing to report. No weird reports from town-” Joyce smacked his arm.

“Not the town.” Joyce extended her hand for the cigarette. “You and Jane.”

“Well, raising a teenage daughter is different from what I expected.”

“Oh? How’s that?” Joyce pinned him with a skeptical expression.

“You think I’m exaggerating?”

“I remember being a teenage girl. I can’t have been any worse to my parents than you were to yours.” Joyce focused on something in the distance. Hopper tried to work out an argument, but every argument died in his throat. He was a mess in high school. Hawkins in its entirety was a mess. But Joyce’s family...

The crisp air stagnated around them, both reluctant to break the silence. Joyce brought the cigarette to her lips and inhaled, but choked and coughed. She still wasn’t used to Hopper’s filterless cigarettes, but she did it on purpose to lighten the mood or make him laugh sometimes.

“Smoking unhealthy for us. We should try stopping again.”

“Probably.” Hopper leaned against her house and stuffed his hands into his pockets. A year ago, Bob tried to persuade Joyce to stop, then she tried to convince him to stop too.

“I didn’t want to talk. I wanted to... check up on things. Make sure nothing happened...” Joyce trailed off.

“Missed a few dinner dates and you’re worried?” Hopper joked. Joyce rolled her eyes. They weren’t dates. The relationship between Hopper and herself remained vague at best, but Hopper and Jane staying for dinner or Jane sleeping over was a routine part of their lives. It bothered her when Hopper decided not to come over for a few days.

“Yes. I... it’s nice having you here. Both of you,” She whispered. The

fall and winter made her anxious. What happened during the summer worried her, but it was nothing compared to the horrors that happened when the weather cooled. One after another, strange occurrences piled up one after another until everything came crashing down.

It always started with Will having a nightmare or night terror. Then Hopper becoming a no-show for a while as he dealt with other strange happenings around town. Then harrowing things hit them one after another.

Last night, Will had his first nightmare since summer ended...

Admittedly, the night terror wasn't awful, not as intense as past episodes. Will insisted the others were different, but what did that mean? Joyce worried things were stirring up again, but the dreadful feelings differed from the time Will vanished. Or last year. Or the summer.

"Joyce... is everything all right?" Hopper interrupted her thought. He reached over and relieved her of the cigarette she'd been holding for too long. Despite having the cigarette, she bit her nails on her free hand. Joyce crossed her arms and fixated on her feet. She opened and closed her mouth a few times before she spoke.

Nothing was amiss. Not yet. Not yet...

"It's... the calm before the storm. It always like this. Then stuff happens around us and weird things pop up. Yes, I got worried when you skipped some dinners." She rambled, hugging herself even tighter as she left the words spill out of her mouth. "Sorry, I'm just... thinking too much."

Her expression hardened in the same uneasy look she bore for two years. Or was it three? He wondered why she still confided in him so easily.. Hopper extended his arm behind her and rubbed her back. It was his go to move to console her, but he didn't know if it worked or not.

"Will had another nightmare," Hopper stated. Joyce turned to him, surprised.

“Did he tell you?”

“No.”

“... Did he tell Jane?”

Hopper shrugged. El didn't tell Hopper anything, but he didn't miss how she trailed closely behind Will today or her insistence on turning in the seat to watch him. Hopper wasn't the best at reading Will's moods, but El was. Any abnormal behavior toward Will meant something either happened to her or something happened to Will. El was fine, so it must be Will. That method of diagnosis worked for him so far.

“Did he tell you about the nightmare?” He asked, speaking quietly just in case someone overheard.

“Sort of... he said it wasn't the others. He woke up, but... well, it wasn't the others. Will didn't panic or cry. I don't think he understood the nightmare either,” she explained.

“How do you feel about that?”

“... I trust him. If he were lying... I would feel it.”

“Is the same as the summer? Or last year?” Joyce fell silent and considered his question. No, it wasn't the same, she concluded that moments ago. “So, your sons explanation is accurate. It's not the others, right?”

It wasn't like the others, it could be a regular old nightmare. Hopper claimed nothing weird happened, so the next disaster must be far off. Or at least, she hoped so. Joyce leaned into his side, trying to steal his warmth. While her anxiety wasn't gone, she couldn't deny the small wave of relief that washed over her.

“Wow Hop. You are quite the detective. I was just thinking too much.” Hopper squeezed her by her shoulders. She laughed and pushed away. They grew sober again before Hopper spoke.

“I'm here any time, Joyce. If you need to talk. Or anything else.”

“... Not any time.” Joyce mumbled. Hopper’s cool fingers gently took her face. She leaned into his touch as he raised her face and their eyes met.

“... I am here ANY TIME, Joyce.” Hopper repeated. “... Any time.”

When El and Hopper left, Will unpacked his bag at his desk. He pulled out Jonathan’s wrapped gift from Nancy. Why she didn’t give it to Jonathan herself? Both teens were busy, so it made sense. Jonathan helped their mom with the preparations for Christmas and worked overtime. Nancy got a temporary job somewhere too. They were saving and planning for college, or so he thought. Curious, he bought the box to his ear and shook it. The item inside sounded solid or in something solid. Nothing rolled or rustled.

Will opened the desk drawer and placed the present in an empty spot. He needed to put the present under the tree when Jonathan was asleep or distracted. Will imagined Jonathan’s reaction. When Jonathan noticed the gift, that weird smile of his would spread across his face and stay there for the rest of the day. That’s what he expected to happen, a picture worth taking or drawing. Will hoped Jonathan remembered to get Nancy a gift too. Maybe he should remind him...

Will reached into his bag again to retrieve his unfinished artwork for the latest D&D campaign, but his hand met with something else instead. Confused, Will seized the object, surprised to discover another wrapped box. He struggled to remember putting another box in his bag, but he only placed Nancy’s in his bag. Will turned the box in his hands, spotting a tag.

To: El

From: Mike

Will’s brows furrowed. Either El stuck this in the bag or Mike stuffed it there instead of giving the present to El himself... Mike helped him gather his stuff and put it in his bag, he must have done it then. Did Mike want him to give El his present? Will snorted, who would do that? Now that he thought about it, wasn’t Nancy doing the same?

Will leaned in his chair and snagged his radio from the bed. El used it earlier until she had to leave. He twisted the dial, stopping on their usual channel. Even if Will gave El the present, El wouldn't want her gift given to her secondhand. At least, that's what he thought. Mike knew too, right? Mike asked Will for gift suggestions weeks ago. He appeared excited to get her a gift, but Will acknowledged buying a gift is different from giving the gift and seeing their reaction.

"Mike? I... have a question. Over."

"Told you Will would call," Lucas replied with unmistakable amusement. "Over."

"Wait, you guys know about... the present?" Will inquired, wondering what transpired when they left. Will tried to be as ambiguous as possible in case El was on the line. Joyce helped Will buy her a radio last Christmas, but the signal was too poor for her to listen in most of the time.

"Lucas, we promised Nancy to stop making fun of him." Dustin argued, though he didn't sound convincing.

"Nancy isn't here and Mike is her little brother, she'll always defend him. Besides, she kinda did the same thing. Besides, Mike is pretending not to hear us."

"What Nancy did isn't the same. Mike is much worse." Dustin defended.

"Can you guys shut up?" Mike answered. Lucas buzzed in for a few seconds just to make sure everyone heard his snort. When the line cleared again, Mike spoke. "What is your question Will?"

"Jonathan? Will?"

Will turned toward his bedroom door just as Joyce walked into view, perplexed.

"What's wrong mom?" Will got up and joined her at the door, radio conversation forgotten.

"Something happen?" Jonathan joined them in the hallway holding a

plate he'd been drying. Joyce pulled a silver bracelet from a green velvet box. The silver bracelet had two charms. In engraved lettering, one read 'Will' and the other 'Jonathan'.

"You guys, this is so sweet." Joyce sniffed. She unlocked the bracelet and draped it around her wrist. When she struggled to latch the bracelet, Will stepped closer to help her as Jonathan's hands were full. "I love it so much, it's gorgeous."

Joyce looked to take in Will and Jonathan's reaction... but their faces expressed nothing but bewilderment.

"Mom... we didn't get that." Jonathan pointed out.

"I've never seen that." Will added, holding his mother's arm to scrutinize the small dangling charms.

"... What?" Joyce frowned and reevaluated the velvet box. The box lacked a name or identifier. Joyce assumed it was from them, she discovered it in her coat pocket by accident just after Hopper left-

She gasped, but continued to frown, confused.

"... I guess it's from Hopper?"

"You guess?" Jonathan took the box to look himself.

Will's gaze shifted between the bracelet and his mother. Despite the confusion on, she looked pleased and far from upset. Hopper gave Joyce a Christmas present without giving it to her in person despite having the perfect opportunity. A peculiar feeling of déjà vu washed over him.

'*Who does that?*' Will asked again, at least his surprise wasn't so egregious.

"Why can't we stay with them for Christmas?"

Hopper paused mid bite and glanced up to El who barely touched her plate. Jonathan made the meal and El loved his cooking.

“... Something wrong with the food?”

“Why can’t we stay at their house?” El repeated, ignoring his dodge. Hopper sighed and set his fork on his plate, considering his words.

“You can’t just stay at someone’s home for Christmas.”

“Why not?”

“The most important part of Christmas is sleeping and waking up to presents under the tree. That means you have to spend the night. Or two nights.”

“I’ve done that.” El’s reply was as sharp. “And the summer and on weekends. I still do.” Sleepovers at Will’s wasn’t different from sleeping at home. She stayed there often enough for it to be a second home. Hopper reformed his case.

“Yes but Christmas is different. It’s a holiday for family.” Hopper explained.

“We went Thanksgiving.”

“Look, it’d be different if they invited us like Thanksgiving. We can’t invite ourselves, not on Christmas. There might not be presents for you or they might not have enough food.” That gave her pause.

El’s eyes roamed the cramped cabin where she and Hopper did their best to decorate. Lights hung around the front door and a small tree stood in the corner of the living room. A wreath hung inside the front door and Christmas ornaments magnets stuck on the refrigerator. Decorating the cabin was enjoyable... but she couldn’t help but think it would be more fun to decorate the Byers house with them. Together. She wished she’d been there to take part.

“... It’s a holiday for family?”

“Well... yeah.”

“... But they are family... like you.”

Hopper slouched in his seat, stunned. Over the past few years,

Hopper grew close with the Byers, more than he ever imagined he could be. It started with a missing boy, Joyce's missing boy. He remembered the day she appeared in his office looking frazzled and worried. Joyce's reemergence in his life confused him. They avoided each other for years, but she was desperate. From that point on, everything changed.

Hopper couldn't imagine his life without them. He wasn't sure if he viewed Will and Jonathan as his sons, but he protected them with his life. El was the piece that tied everything together.

El and Will formally met after two years. The first time he saw them together, it was like they knew each other their whole lives. A bit of an exaggeration, but El formed an attachment to Will that he hadn't seen with Mike or any of their mutual friends. Their friends weren't surprised. Hopper wondered if it were supernatural, fate, or both.

When they visited the Byers home for the first time, El found her way into Will's room and they painted and drew pictures together. Arts and crafts was their favorite pastime. Joyce berated him for referring to it as such.

'They're artists, doing art. Not just arts and crafts,' she said. He rolled his eyes until El brought home the drawings and put them around the cabin and gave them to him. She was so proud of her stick drawing, but Hopper did his best not to burst into tears. He tried to keep El and Sara separate in his heart, for El's sake, but it wasn't always so easy.

When the sleepovers began, El brought home tapes Jonathan let her borrow. Hopper soon bought her a Walkman for private listening. He didn't talk to Jonathan as much as the others, but Jonathan often came to him for advice. Jonathan gave off a distrusting vibe and yet he told Hopper everything going on when asked. Hopper wondered if being too trusting was a unique Byers family trait.

El and Joyce had something special. Joyce never called her El, only Jane. Joyce didn't wear much makeup and didn't have time to do her nails, but Joyce brushed and combed Jane's hair whenever she had free time or Jane asked. Jane wasn't into the whole bowl cut idea, but she loved when Joyce played in her hair. Joyce enjoyed it too

since she never had a daughter. Hopper arrived to the house plenty of times to see El and Will's hair in ridiculous updos or littered with barrettes. Will appeared well acquainted with his mother's homemade hair salon. Despite his hair cut, his hair remained smooth and well taken care of... The no daughter excuse seemed like just that, an excuse.

Joyce.

He didn't understand their relationship at this point. He didn't understand why she still came to him. Joyce trusted him with even the smallest of problems despite his lies and deceit. She let him have it over keeping Jane a secret he neglected to tell her... but she forgave him. She still trusted him. He didn't dare to express his true feelings to her.

... But if he could stay with her and her sons at her house for the rest of his life...

"Hopper?"

Hopper blinked and refocused on El sitting across from him. She was performing the strongest kicked puppy act she could muster. It worked, but there was still one obstacle.

"We can't go to someone's house uninvited for Christmas, El. It's impolite. Next year..." El's frown intensified as she tested his answer. He wasn't lying, but it didn't make her any happier.

"Sorry kid... but I can make it up to you."

"... How?"

"You can open one present tonight," El straighten in her chair and got up. "AFTER you finish your food." El froze and returned to her seat. A new realization occurred to her.

"It's not Christmas Eve?"

"It's Christmas Eve Eve, so one present today and one tomorrow. That's what Will said, right?"

El didn't need anymore encouragement. She swallowed the food as fast as she could without making a mess or choking. Hopper rolled his eyes, but decided not to comment. When they finished, Hopper and El placed their dishes in the sink and retired to the living room.

Under the tree were a few presents, the presents he admitted to buying. El didn't have the means to buy Hopper a gift yet, but she made him something hidden in her bedroom.

El looked over the presents, pondering which to open first. There were big ones, but most were small. She had no idea what they might be, but that was the exciting part, size didn't matter. El took the closest gift and shook it, trying to guess the contents. Will told her the heavier the gift, the better. What better time to put his logic to the test? She glanced at the other gifts trying to weigh them with her eyes, but noticed the card given to them earlier by Joyce placed atop a present.

'In that case... you should DEFINITELY open cards early.' Will explained.

"The card." El whispered. The car conversation and Will's vague statements surrounding cards came flooding back. El glanced at Hopper sitting on the couch.

"What?"

"He wants me to open the card first." El grabbed the card and held it up to him. His eyebrow raised, not following her train of thought.

"Who?"

"Will," El fanned the card as she spoke. "He told us in the car. It was a hint."

Hopper recalled the strange conversation and the stranger conversation with Joyce and Jonathan. Now it made sense. There must be something important.

"Fine, let's have a look."

El ripped open the envelope before Hopper even finished his

sentence. She pulled out a red card with a Christmas tree on front, decorated with glitter and shiny plastic jewels. Hopper expected tickets or something to fall out of the card when El opened it, but nothing came. El's eyes moved back and forth as she read a message inside, she took a while. He didn't know if she was having trouble reading or if the message was long.

"Need he-," She leaped up with a screech, holding the card to her chest. He'd never heard her make that noise.

"What?! What is it?"

El took one large step to reach him, shoving the card in his face. Hopper frowned at her and took the card to read.

Dear Jim and Jane,

The last few years have been difficult for us. Together we made it through the toughest of trials. Without you, who knows where we would be today.

Both of you are amazing and beautiful people and you have become incredibly important and special people in our lives.

Christmas is about spending time with your family and the people you hold dear. Our door is always open for you and we want you to celebrate Christmas with us this year and every year following.

With Love,

The Byers

Joyce, Jonathan and Will signed their names under Joyce's letter. A doodle of a snowman on the side with the generic holiday greeting message belonged to Will.

"... Well-"

"Can we go? Please?" El leaned on his shoulder to look at the card. "They invited us."

"They did."

“... That means we’re going?”

“I guess we are.” A wide smile spread on her face. She reached and plucked the card from his hand to reread. She never got this excited when it involved just them, made him jealous. If Joyce, Will and Jonathan were his competition, he didn’t mind too much.

“Now you can give her the gift.” El closed the card, now she held it like a sacred treasure. “It’s perfect. Joyce will love it.”

“She might have her gift by now.”

“Huh?”

“I left it for her earlier. I’m sure she’s discovered it by now.”

“You gave it to her?” El questioned, confused by his vague wording. “What do you mean... ‘discovered’?”

“Well.” Hopper ran his hand through his hair and crossed his legs, “I left it in her coat pocket, so she might have discovered it.”

SMACK

Hopper sat forward, startled by El’s smack to his forehead. It wasn’t enough to hurt or even sting, but surprised him.

“That’s stupid!” She exclaimed, getting up off the couch. Her hands found her way to her hips. “Why didn’t you give it to her???”

El and Hopper spent months finding a present for Joyce. Hopper suggested the idea a while back. Problem was, Hopper had no idea what to gift her, and neither did El.

Flowers?

‘Too romantic,’ he said.

Chocolate?

‘It’s not for Valentine’s Day,’ was his excuse.

She was out of ideas. She wished to ask Will, but Will might

accidently spill the beans. Jonathan too.

So, Hopper took her to the mall. She'd been to the mall before during the summer. Max let her borrow a hat for extra cover and Mike never let her out of his sight, just in case. The party devoted most of their time in the shoe, electronic and music stores. Walking and loitering in such a crowded stores and walkways overwhelmed her at first, but she eased into the activity.

The experience with Hopper was different. Instead, they spent their time in Sears and the various jewelry stores. Boring didn't fit how she felt. Boring required spending hours doing nothing, but Hopper was averse to being in the mall. They'd walk in, browse for thirty minutes, and leave the moment Hopper felt inconvenienced or annoyed.

Jewelry?

'Yeah, we'll go with that,' he concluded after a few trips to the place he appeared to hate with every fiber of his being.

She didn't know much, but jewelry seemed more romantic and special than flowers or chocolate. More expensive too, but she didn't question it. Not aloud at least. Every trip they took to the mall together, Hopper visited a different jewelry store. At every store, he focused on bracelets. They looked at a variety of bracelets, some more expensive and elaborate than others.

Finally, they found THE bracelet. A silver charm bracelet. The sample bracelets had many interesting charms on display. There were animals, objects, and even a few personalized ones with names. That's when her idea came into play.

'Get one for Jonathan and one for Will.' She pointed at flat silver charms. The examples had engravings on them such as names or short quotes. *'Pretty.'*

Hopper didn't object. He ordered the engraving right away and picked up the bracelet a week later. A beautiful, shiny, and silver bracelet. El pictured Joyce wearing it regularly despite never seeing Joyce wear jewelry. She looked forward to hearing or seeing her face

light up when she realized the charms had her sons' names on them.

El glared at Hopper. He rubbed the back of his neck, pretending he did nothing wrong.

"Who does that??" She demanded . His only answer was a mumbled unintelligible response.

Jonathan never thought Christmas could be like this.

He enjoyed every Christmas with his mother and his brother, but this one was different. This year they had two extra people. His early Christmas celebrations pained him if they can be called celebrations. Lonnie made every holiday miserable. The first time Jonathan enjoyed Christmas is the first time Lonnie was absent.

"Can I have another?" Jonathan looked down, unsurprised to find El next to him absorbed with his progress on the stove.

"You had a bite two seconds ago," Jonathan flipped the potato pancake in the pan. "At this rate, there won't be any left by the time I finish."

"She can have one more bite." Jonathan looked to his other side. Joyce placed another uncooked potato cake on a plate for him. "We have plenty." Joyce grinned and Jonathan shrugged.

"Sounds like you're spoiling her," Jonathan teased with a smirk. El scoffed, pretending to be offended by Jonathan's jab. Will chuckled from the dinner table and placed a stack of plates for Christmas Eve dinner. Jonathan ripped off a paper towel and wrapped a fresh potato cake inside.

"Savor it." Jonathan instructed as he passed her the towel. "It's hot, be careful."

"Ok." Pleased, El returned to the dinner table as Will spread out the plates.

"Can I have a piece?" Will eyed El's pancake. She didn't hesitate to break off a piece for him.

“By the time it’s time to eat, both of you will be full.” Hopper sat at the kitchen table with a large bowl and uncooked chicken. It needed prepping to marinate overnight for Christmas dinner the following day. Joyce never roasted an entire chicken. Store bought ham was her go to, but Hopper stepped up to do it this year.

“It’ll be fine.” Joyce insisted. As she washed her hands, her new bracelet clanked against the kitchen sink. She hadn’t taken it off since she discovered it in her coat pocket yesterday.

To no one’s surprise, Hopper bought her the bracelet. When El and Hopper arrived, El was happy that Joyce loved it, but he didn’t miss El’s occasional glower directed at Hopper.

Although Hopper and El ate dinner with them more times than Jonathan could count, today felt different. The holiday cheer affected him more than he thought, his face felt sore from smiling. Most of the dinner comprised Hopper saying something he thought was funny, Joyce chuckling and rolling her eyes, and El saying something snarky in return. Jonathan expected Hopper to refute her jab, but he asked again for El’s forgiveness.

Forgiveness for what? Whatever it was got a laugh out of Will. At least he knew what was going on.

As the night continued on, El’s excitement intensified, he’d never seen her so... active. Will tried to play games to entertain her, but it only made her more hyper. Her energy infected Will too, before long both were running and jumping around the house. Joyce told them to settle down many times that night. Hopper had to step in and tell them to quiet down. They did. For a while. The peace didn’t last long.

Jonathan didn’t mind. Their horsing around was a picture goldmine. While Jonathan couldn’t keep the photos at home, El loved them. Over the last year, he took and gave El so many pictures, pictures of anything she wanted and pictures he took on his own. He speculated how big her collection was now.

“Can we open a present now?” Will inquired. Joyce and Hopper finished tidying the kitchen and everyone gathered in the living

room, enjoying the Christmas album Joyce played every year.

“Now is a good time,” Joyce agreed. She sat between Jonathan and Hopper on the couch and gave Jonathan a quick one armed hug. Joyce shared the kids excitement though she wasn’t performing flip tricks in the hallway like them.

Will suggested inviting Hopper and El originally, but Joyce took over after that. Joyce spent weeks straightening up the house for the occasion hoping El remained oblivious until she placed the decorations. Joyce bought more ornaments for the tree and even expanded the dinner menu for Christmas. Or at least, she tried and immediately got anxious that her cooking wouldn’t taste good.

That’s where he stepped up. Joyce handled everything else, but he took over most of the cooking to ease her worries. It’s why he started cooking all those years ago. She worked hard enough caring for them, the least he could do was make breakfast and dinner.

“Jonathan.” Will held a small wrapped box out to him with a knowing smile. Jonathan returned the grin and took the gift.

From: Nancy

To: Jonathan

“Nancy?” Jonathan glanced up, but Will already turned away, handing another present to El. El read the tag, confused.

“Mike?”

“Yeah. They wanted me to give you guys their presents since they couldn’t be here,” Will explained.

Understandable. Nancy and Jonathan’s schedules didn’t match this year. He gave her a gift early just in case something happened or they got busy. She promised to have his for Christmas. If this Christmas weren’t a special case, inviting Nancy and Mike would have been nice too.

“Why??” El questioned, pinning Will her gaze.

"He uh... didn't expect to see you on Christmas... or something like that," Will stammered.

"We were there." El argued, troubled by the situation. Will shrugged.

"I know," Will responded. El frown deepened. She swung her head toward Hopper with narrowed eyes.

"What??" Hopper said defensively.

Soft knocks on his door stirred Jonathan from his light slumber. He never slept long on Christmas and Christmas Eve ever since he was a child. Jonathan rolled out of bed to the door. Joyce stood in the hall with a robe draped on her shoulders. A rustling from the living room indicated Hopper was awake too, rolling up his designated bed roll.

"Ready?" Joyce asked. Her voice revealed her barely contained excitement. Was like this for his or Will's first Christmas? He couldn't remember. Jonathan smiled and rubbed his eyes.

"Yeah, give me a minute to set up the camcorder."

Earlier in the year, Jonathan bought a tripod for Bob's camcorder. Jonathan used it every opportunity he had. He devoted a drawer in his room for the family videos he collected. How impressed would Bob be if he were alive? Jonathan pretended the camera allowed Bob to see their lives from whatever afterlife. It was the least he could do to make up lost opportunities with the man who saved the life of his little brother and his mom.

Jonathan shook his head, concentrating task at hand. Bob brought regret and guilt, unfit emotions for what should be a joyous day. Jonathan squinted through the viewfinder, focusing on the tree. The camcorder was far enough to capture everything and prevent Will or El from knocking into it when they rushed in.

When Joyce woke them, they didn't rush in like Jonathan expected. Will pushed El by her shoulders and Joyce trailed behind them. El's face lit up when she saw the tree. More presents sat under the tree

compared to last night.

‘Santa’ came.

For the next few hours, everyone opened their presents. They weren’t rolling in cash, so many of the presents were mundane. Jonathan made a mixtape for Will with the latest hits and his old favorites. He made El a few tapes too, but he hadn’t pinned her musical preferences yet. They were random songs mixed with songs he liked and songs Will liked.

Joyce bought Will more art supplies. Last year she gave him acrylic paint. This year, watercolors and paper. For El, a large set of washable markers since Hopper worried about messes. She bought El a few shirts she hoped she might like too. They were ‘hip’ and ‘punk’, or at least they were to Joyce. El liked them at least.

Joyce knew Jonathan well too. She bought more film for his camera and tape for the camcorder. They weren’t cheap. She worked overtime to afford it, but he didn’t dare complain. He was happy to receive, and she was happy to give.

After dinner, Jonathan retired to the couch to review the recordings. Everything he didn’t capture on the camcorder he took with his camera. Once Christmas ended and Hopper and El went home, the tapes and pictures would have to go with them, just in case. The strong temptation to copy and hide them in his sock drawer popped up now and then, but he resisted for El’s safety. None of them knew when the government might raid their house and take pictures. Or take their stuff as ‘evidence’. If he recalled correctly, they never returned his D&D supplies after they raided their house looking for El when Will disappeared. The government kept some of it and Mike’s parents would not get them back, that’s for sure. No pictures of El could be added to the family photo album.

The couch moved. He turned, finding Joyce leaned over the couch and pleased with herself.

“Yeah?” He asked, pausing the camcorder.

“I got the right film this time didn’t I?” Joyce crossed her arms

smugly. She tried getting more tape for the recorder three times before, but got the wrong size. She had a hard time walking into the Radio Shack or staying in there for long. She wouldn't ask for help or take her time to buy the right one. Jonathan later returned them for the right size.

She spent time to purchase the correct ones in the store Bob spent much of his time... it was progress. Jonathan smiled and bowed his head.

"Yep, perfect fit. Everything looks great."

"Let me see?" Joyce joined Jonathan on the couch. Jonathan rewound the tape with the camcorder. He stopped and played the tape when Will lead El into the room. Jonathan already watched it, so he focused on his mother instead. A permanent smile framed her face. Sometimes her lips trembled while Will and El opened the presents.

"Will worked the extra mile," Joyce spoke with an appreciative sigh. Jonathan eyed her.

"Why do you say that?"

"Look at him," Joyce answered, pointing at the screen. "So clever."

At first glance, nothing unusual too place. El opened each present with excitement while everybody laughed, chatted or teased each other. Hopper eased into the frame as time passed, the angle catching his hand covering his permanent grin. Joyce and Will formed a train handing out gifts ensuring no one got left out.

Finally, he saw a pattern. When El's turn came, Will's attention flickered toward the camera. He grabbed a present and placed it while his eyes darted between El, the present and the camera. The final position captured her opening the gift and the subsequent reaction.

El's turn came and went. Next was Hopper, his own, Joyce, Will, and El again. Once again, Will checked the camcorder, took El's present, and arranged it in a spot where the camera caught the opening and

reaction. Over and over, Will never missed a beat and El never acknowledged his gentle persuasion or she didn't care.

How did that slip by him?

"... Maybe I should give the camera to Will instead."

A crash from the kitchen followed by a loud regretful curse startled them. Joyce huffed and got up, heading back to the kitchen.

"Hop! You better not have broken another one of my glass cups."

Jonathan accompanied her to the kitchen, finding Hopper kneeling on the floor trying to pick up broken glass while clenching his bleeding fist. Joyce gasped, groaned, and tiptoed around Hopper to pull out a first aid kit.

"Sorry Joyce, I wasn't paying attention."

"Come on," She said placing the first aid kit on the table. "It's like have a five-year-old again." Hopper huffed and glowered, but sat at the table offering his hand. "Jonathan, can you-"

"I got it."

Jonathan grabbed the broom and dustpan to clean the floor. His lips pursed, resisting the urge to chuckle or snort. It amazed him how fearlessly Joyce talked down to a man twice her size. Jonathan cleaned the floor, but the adults continued bickering at the table. They threw playful jabs left and right with no hurt feelings.

Jonathan excused himself, leaving them alone to chat. He returned to the couch and reviewing the tape.

Joyce noticed Will went the extra mile to record El's first Christmas with them, but did she notice Hopper staring at her when he wasn't watching El opening another gift? Or how many glances she stole of Hopper when his attention was elsewhere?

His mother's true feelings toward Hopper remained a mystery to him. Hopper and Joyce sat at the table laughing in each other's company, holding hands or sharing a cigarette, and yet weren't dating despite

the look in their eyes whenever they met. The similarities between them and his own relationship couldn't be ignored, but Jonathan didn't know the history and baggage that clearly weighed on their hearts.

Together, and yet so far apart.

El entered Will's room after a nice shower and changing into her brand new pajamas. Joyce bought them for her. Joyce bought them to keep at the Byers house so she always had a pair in case she forgot. Over the summer, El forgot pajamas plenty of times and borrowed something from Joyce to sleep in. That was fine, but it was better to have your own in Joyce's mind. El had her own drawer in Joyce's room for her clothes. It got fuller and fuller as the months passed.

Will sat where she left him, at his desk, concentrating on the art piece Mike asked for. Will wanted it to be the first drawing he tried with watercolor. The paper wasn't made for watercolor, but he figured he could make it work or trace it onto the paper Joyce got him for Christmas.

El stepped over her bedding to climb on top of his bed and step off on the other side. She didn't stand by too close, she startled him on plenty of occasions and accidentally caused him to ruin an artwork or two. Sometimes he became so concentrated on his work, the world around him faded away.

Instead, she looked over his shoulder to see his progress. Normally he would've noticed her by now, she wasn't stepping on her tiptoes.

The drawing isn't what she expected. He wasn't working on Mike's drawing at all. Pencil in hand, he worked furiously on a picture of the sk-

Will gasped and glanced over his shoulder, finally noticing her presence. Their eyes met and silence followed. They decided long ago to tell each other everything, no matter what. Will wasn't hiding anything technically. He told El about the nightmare.

In the nightmare, Will felt *his* presence, but he saw and heard nothing. It was enough to stir Will from sleep and worry Joyce, but that's it. The unusual nightmare, if he could call it that, distracted him for days. He tried to ignore it, but it bothered him endlessly. If he couldn't figure it out in his mind or with words, he'd do it with paper and his art. So he waited until he was alone...

Will dropped his pencil and turned his full attention to El, trying to explain himself.

"Sorry, I jus-

"Keep going," El interrupted. "We have to see." Will blinked, suddenly uncertain of fulfilling his curiosity. El placed her hand on his shoulder, squeezing it in encouragement. Nothing else needed to be said. Will picked up his pencil and continued. The drawing didn't take long to complete. Will put down then pencil again as El plucked the drawing from the desk.

It was nothing.

Well, it wasn't nothing, but a picture of the sky. An empty - albeit cloudy - sky. Normal non-threatening clouds. Will drew many images of the horizon and the sky over the past year, but they've never been... empty.

"Where is he?"

"He's... gone," Will watched her eyebrows knit in confusion. "He... left somewhere else."

"Somewhere else?" Will nodded. "... But why? Where?"

"I... don't know." It wasn't the answer she wanted, but he didn't know what else to say. "Sorry." El waved her hand as if to slap his apologies into the ether.

"Why did he come to you?"

Will considered her question. That was the problem, he didn't understand either.

"It's as if... he wanted me to know he was leaving." El frowned, puzzled by his explanation. "It makes no sense, and I don't believe it. He must be... planning something. Whatever it is... I don't think he's figured it out yet. If he's actively doing something... I would know." El nodded in agreement.

"We have to tell." El stated matter-of-factly. Will sighed and leaned into the desk. They needed to tell everyone. He and El acted as alarm bells for everything unnatural. If either of them noticed something strange, they first told each other and then everyone else.

And yet... he hated bringing it up to everyone. He hated that extraordinary things still happened and never stopped. If only he resisted the curiosity for another few days... another week, however long it took to enjoy the holidays...

"We'll tell them later," El added. Will turned. "Later."

Ah. She knew what he was thinking or she felt the same? A smile spread across his face.

"Right," he agreed. A smile spread across her too... a mischievous one. Before he had time to react, El raised her hand and flicked Will's forehead. "Hey!"

"You said sorry twice." El raised her hand again, Will covered his forehead before El got the chance to flick him a second time. They wrestled as El tried to pry his hands away and Will tried to stay in his seat.

Joyce tasked her with helping Will apologize less. If he apologized when he shouldn't, she would flick his forehead. After speaking to Jonathan and the rest of the party, this was their solution. It wasn't hard and didn't sting, but it served as a lighthearted reminder.

"If you keep going, I'll spoil Mike's present!" Will cried and El froze.

Will gave her the gift that Mike gave to him, but she refused to open it. As he predicted, she wanted the gift from Mike with him present. She convinced Jonathan to wait too despite Nancy's reasonings being different from Mike's. El gave him a dirty look, but didn't look

willing to back down from the pursuit of his forehead. In reality, he had no idea what Mike got her for Christmas, but she didn't know that.

"It's-"

"Don't!" El covered his mouth with her hands. The suddenness sent Will falling backwards to the floor accidentally pulling El with him. They laid in a heap on the floor, contemplating what just happened.

"Hey," Will lifted his face from the floor, finding his mother at the door with her arms crossed. "I told you two not to rough house near the desk right? One of you could get hurt."

"Sorry mom..." It was his fault. He teased El too much, but she teased him too. They were even for now.

Joyce nodded and left them be.

"... Hey El... do you think you can move now?" Will asked. He was still flat on his stomach and El was on his back enjoying the view of the ceiling. She wasn't heavy, but laying on the floor wasn't comfortable. El shrugged.

"... I wouldn't spoil the present, El. I don't know what he got either," he admitted. Mike asked Will for gift ideas, but who knew what Mike decided. His confession satisfied her so she sat up. Will pushed himself off the floor, but stayed seated and leaned against his bed. "We can invite him tomorrow? Christmas is over, everyone can come over now." Will offered. When El nodded, Will lifted his hand, feeling around his bed until he felt the familiar shape of his radio.

"Hey guys."

Will and El waited for a reply and soon enough, the others chimed in.

"Hey Will," Lucas said. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas!" Dustin answered with more enthusiasm. He thought he heard Max hum her attendance, she didn't care for their chosen form of communication even though she bought the radio herself.

Mike didn't answer right away, but on days like this, his mother kept him busy with what she deemed family activities.

"Want to come over tomorrow?"